

# YMCA-Proposed Relocation to the Civic Athletic Complex

---

The City of Bellingham and the YMCA are both providers of recreational services to the residents and visitors of Bellingham and Whatcom County. Both share a common mission of providing services to promote a healthy, equitably served community of all ages and abilities. In a community with limited resources, creative and strategic approaches to dealing effectively with capital needs are crucial, and collaborative partnerships are essential.

The City and the YMCA have been working together to determine the best opportunity to support the Bellingham community's need for a health and wellness community center. If the parties come to an agreement, the City and the YMCA intend to collaborate on such a facility.

## Why is the YMCA, in partnership with the City, considering moving the downtown Y to the Civic Athletic Complex?

In 2018, the YMCA approached the City about the possibility of relocating to the Civic Athletic Complex, adjacent to the Arne Hanna Aquatic Center (AHAC). After identifying the need for significant upgrades to its downtown facility at 1256 N State Street, the YMCA conducted an extensive evaluation to analyze options for a location that provided the best possible programming and services to the Bellingham and Whatcom County community. The YMCA's evaluation process identified the Civic Athletic Complex as the best location for a new community health and wellness center.

The AHAC generates over \$500,000 in revenue each year by offering learn to swim programs, programs for senior citizens, special populations, youth and teens, and facility rentals for competitive swim teams. The AHAC is subsidized with over \$1 million in general fund tax dollars per year because revenues do not cover the cost of operations and maintenance. It is anticipated that operating AHAC will cost the City \$13-16 million over the next 10 years. This partnership could reduce City taxpayer's financial obligation for the maintenance and operation of the existing aquatic center, while maintaining and increasing public access to improved aquatic space and a brand-new community wellness center. The new facility is envisioned to include programming space for seniors, special populations, youth (including childcare), enlarged aquatic space, an indoor gymnasium, an elevated track, a community kitchen and more.

## What's been done so far?

The YMCA and City completed a preliminary feasibility study for the proposal to build a 50,000 square foot facility adjacent to an expanded Arne Hanna Aquatic Center. The City and YMCA jointly commissioned a facility conditions assessment of AHAC that concluded the AHAC will require significant capital maintenance investment over the next 10 years in addition to the projected \$13-16 million in projected general operating expenses.

On July 15, City and YMCA staff made a presentation to the Bellingham City Council summarizing the feasibility and viability of the project, including a conceptual site plan. The Council comments were favorable to the proposal. No final or binding agreements have been reached, but the parties will work in good faith to develop an agreement.

## What are the next steps?

If the City and YMCA reach an agreement that allows the YMCA to relocate to City-owned property, the YMCA will proceed with fundraising, design and permitting including additional studies for traffic, stormwater, and parking. The estimated timeline is 3-4 years before the new facility would be complete and occupied. The City Council will need to approve any agreement with the YMCA, but there is currently no proposal before the Council as the YMCA and City have not yet completed a draft agreement. One or more public hearings will be held prior to final approval of any agreed upon plan.

## Who will operate the Arne Hanna Aquatic Center?

If the project proceeds, the YMCA will take on all operational functions of the existing aquatic center. However, the City and the YMCA are committed to keeping the facility available to the public. Community members will continue to be able to access the facilities with a daily pass and will not be required to purchase a YMCA membership.

## If the YMCA relocates, won't the community actually *lose* aquatic space?

No. Both parties agree that the aquatic space lost at the existing YMCA space needs to be replaced at the Arne Hanna Aquatic Center as part of this project. Any agreement with the YMCA must include the provision of learn-to-swim, water aerobics and other community aquatic programming at the same or increased level of current offerings at the Arne Hanna Aquatic Center.

The proposed facility plans that have been presented by the YMCA are ***preliminary and conceptual***. No final plans have been drafted or presented.

The conceptual aquatic facility enhancements include expanding swimming lanes from 8 to 12. The addition of four new 25-yard swim lanes could be attached or placed near the instructional pool. These lanes can easily accommodate the average numbers of lap swimmers at the existing YMCA. No decisions have been made on the water temperature of the new lap lanes, but they can be kept cooler than the instructional area even though they may be in the same water body. Both parties understand lanes used for lap swimming must be kept at a temperature that is safe and appropriate for lap swimming. The lane additions can also be used for swim lessons, water aerobics and other programs, freeing up the existing lap pool for more lap swimming.

## Isn't Arne Hanna already too crowded?

Both parties recognize at high demand times there is a shortage of aquatic capacity at the Arne Hanna facility. When AHAC opened in 1995, there were two high schools. Now there are three. The high school dismissal time has been moved back one hour, which in turn has had a domino effect of moving swim team practice and meets further into the late afternoon and evening, impacting other community aquatic programs. The Bellingham School District has expressed significant interest in constructing a new pool to serve the needs of the district as shown in the concept plans prepared by the YMCA. BSD, the YMCA and the City are in discussions regarding the timeline for a new pool and to determine if this site is appropriate.

## What about the YMCA building downtown?

The City and the YMCA recognize that the YMCA's current facility location represents a significant value to both the YMCA and the City. As such, the Parties will exercise their best efforts in a coordinated manner to identify the building use priorities of the current location, and to ensure the YMCA's property asset value is maximized to support the project and the City's downtown Bellingham development strategy.

## Questions?

Bill Ziels, Executive Director, Whatcom Family YMCA: [bziels@whatcomymca.org](mailto:bziels@whatcomymca.org)

Melissa Bianconi, Recreation Manager, City of Bellingham: [Mrbianconi@cob.org](mailto:Mrbianconi@cob.org)